



PROJECT MUSE®

---

## The Transmutation of Love and Avant-Garde Poetics

Heuving, Jeanne

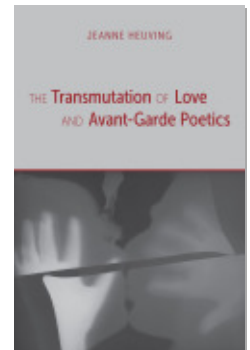
Published by The University of Alabama Press

Heuving, J..

The Transmutation of Love and Avant-Garde Poetics.

Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 2016.

Project MUSE. Web. 20 Sep. 2016. <https://muse.jhu.edu/>.



➔ For additional information about this book

<https://muse.jhu.edu/book/45401>

## Nathaniel Mackey and “Black Sounds”

Song so black it

burnt

my lip . . .

—Nathaniel Mackey, *School of Udhra*

Pound, Duncan, and Mackey found early instruction in melancholic love poems. Yet for all three writers melancholic stances proved to be inadequate for their larger poetic ambitions. Mackey, initially meditating on the advantages of a Petrarchan melancholic love, soon turned his concerns with loss and desire, failure and aspiration, in other directions.<sup>1</sup> In melancholic love poems, a poetic speaker as lover subordinates himself to a beloved who is unavailable. Or as Freudian analysis would have it, the subject jettisons his egoistic self for a superego that finds all meaning in an “object ideal.” Petrarch’s poetic speaker, Schiesari analyzes, is a melancholic lover par excellence, since the dead Laura is an entirely unavailable other. Melancholic love poetry in creating oppositional stances in relationship to unattainable objects at once depends on and tends to fix symbolic orders. In many ways, Lacan’s overall theories are melancholic, given his postulation of a desiring subject who will never attain his love but rather must locate his “real” desire in a symbolic realm, secured by an unavailable beloved, the *objet petit a*. While at times Mackey’s poetry conveys melancholia and seems propelled by Lacanian lack, it ultimately refuses these fixations.

In “Call Me Tantra: Open Field Poetics as Muse,” which was Mackey’s PhD dissertation at Stanford, he meditated on the advantages of Petrarchan melancholic love. Mackey notes: “What the Petrarchan lover fears most is a favorable response from his Lady. Her unattainability is the basis for his . . . *canzone*” (14). Mackey finds a Petrarchan economy in the work of both William Carlos Williams and Charles Olson. He quotes Williams: “It is to assert love . . . not to win it that love exists. If the poet is defeated it is then that he most triumphs, love is most proclaimed” (14). Turning to the poetry of Olson, Mackey notes how “defeat” in love allows poetry to “triumph”: “The dividedness of desire—in part for the woman yet as well for the poem that extols her—proposes the poetic as

in fact impeding the sexual act, and vice-versa" (27). Mackey claims that failure is good for poetry: "Loss, deprivation, and even defeat come to be embraced as among the terms of a pact or accord whose aim is longevity of aspiration" (90). Although Mackey is troubled by this relation, because of how it denies "touch," "comfort," and "sex," he notes its efficacy. But while early in his career Mackey considered the advantages of a Petrarchan love economy, he soon turned to a redistribution of privileged stances and idealized objects. His early insight into this love economy and his set of abstract considerations bespeak both his strong engagement with melancholic love as well as how he, at least in part, is outside of its economies.

In previous chapters I addressed the ways that gender and sexual dispensations determine different poets' possibilities for writing love, but I paid minimal attention to race. While love poetry, given its subject matter, is clearly inflected by gender and sexuality, race is much at play in what Mackey refers to as "unevenly allotted orders of agency," perhaps all the more so in love poetry (*Discrepant* 284). This is evident in the ways that US society at large responds to African American men, in contrast to white Anglo Saxon men, as lovers and sexual beings—exoticizing, delimiting, and punishing them. And while African American men have had considerable leeway to engage and explore a love idiom in diverse forms of music, including assuming the stance of lover in some song lyrics, there is not the same latitude or empowerment for African American men who write love poetry. Indeed, the whole scenario is complex, with African Americans figuring as towering jazz and blues musicians, but finding less acceptance as rock stars. (While there are clearly exceptions to this claim—say, as in the cases of Jimi Hendrix and Michael Jackson—the disproportionate number of white male rock stars who take on the role of lover and top the charts reveals the ways that love is racialized.) Poetry as a written art is intermeshed with literacy and educational hierarchies, and it thus may be more restricted than many popular forms, all the more so because poets often figure in the creation of national identities and because of the presumed permanence of print. To put it bluntly, African American male poets have not had the same possibilities of saying their love publicly with either the aristocratic privilege of Lord Byron or the demotic assuredness of Robert Creeley.

In *Abandoned Women and Poetic Tradition*, Lawrence Lipking strongly differentiates the lyric of abandonment from the lyric of pursuit (xv–xxvii). While Lipking speculates socially and politically about why abandonment lyrics, in counter distinction to lyrics of pursuit, might be very important for women writers, he does not address whether writers marginalized by other determinations, say, by race or sexuality, might find recourse for their erotic expression through this orientation. Nor does he address the rhetorical problem of a marginalized poet in



If there is an aesthetic, ethical, and political dilemma that threads its way through Mackey's work, it is how to engage loss and desire, failure and aspiration, without giving short shrift to either. He responds to this dilemma through engaging art forms that synergistically combine these oppositions, most importantly jazz—a reconstitution of earlier "sorrow songs" in a dissonant, syncopated rearrangement that depends on recalling previous musical passages as these are caught up in a forward movement of mournful, aspiring sounds. Immediately following "Song of the Andoumboulou: 5," in which Erzulie, the muse figure, atypically speaks, Mackey writes poetry in the form of letters to the "Angel of Dust" in "Song of the Andoumboulou: 6" and "Song of the Andoumboulou 7," the first of his epistles that leads to his multivolume, cross-genre fiction *From a Broken Bottle Traces of Perfume Still Emanate*. In these poems, the poetic speaker defends his poetry of loss by insisting that "absence [is] unavoidably an inherence in the texture of things (dreamseed, habitual cloth)" (*Eroding* 50). He thus refuses a dichotomous absence and presence that articulate a binary dynamic conducive to "social othering" and initiates a poetics of "aesthetic othering" (*Discrepant* 265–68). Mackey concludes these initial letters with the poetic speaker recommending a specific piece of music for its "certain arch and / or ache and / or ark of duress, the frazzled edge of what remains 'unsung'" (*Eroding* 54). The poetic speaker signs these letters "N," a nomination that uses the initial of Mackey's first name and that results in the fictional persona N, a composer-musician who serves not only as the letter writer but as one of the characters in Mackey's cross-genre endeavor.

Somewhat perversely, N's initial letters to the Angel of Dust consciously defend his poetry of absence or of lack, his "seed" "cloth," but they also give rise to the profuse fictional and thought exposition *From a Broken Bottle Traces of Perfume Still Emanate* and bring to the fore the possibility of an apposite plenitude in the comedy and antic humor of his fictional endeavors. As H.D. through creating prose fiction sought to remedy how her personal self was interfering with the impersonal and clairvoyant vision she needed to write poetry, Mackey seems to need to write to the Angel of Dust about his collaborating and aspiring jazz band as a necessary accompaniment to the often vatic singularity of his poetic voice. Mackey's prose provides him a way of exploring experience, thoughts, and aesthetics within the socially more explicit realm of fiction writing, a writing of "this" is "that" in contrast to his poetry of "this" is "this."<sup>4</sup>

Throughout Mackey's poetry, a sense of ecstasy, or a standing outside of himself as author and poetic speaker, prevails. He writes in *Whatsaid Serif*: "Some / ecstatic elsewhere's / advocacy strummed, / unsung, lost inside / the oud's complaint" (3).<sup>5</sup> A dispossession derived from large-scale social injustice as well as from failed love reverberates throughout his work. Mackey describes one jazz

rendition in the first book of his epistolary fiction, *Bedouin Hornbook*: “he went from grief, as it were, to grievance, from lover’s lament, one might say, to slave narrative—to some extent erasing the line between the two” (*Broken Bottle* 120). He writes in “Song of the Andoumboulou: 7”: “leg irons gave our voices their weight” (*Eroding* 54). But if loss and its correlates are defining, Mackey also insists on the possibility of fulfillment. The Guyanese novelist Wilson Harris is an important figure for Mackey because of how Harris envisions an attainable fulfillment amid signifying systems that perpetuate the conditions of social injustice as they attempt to ameliorate them. Harris claims that although one must write through existing categories, it is precisely how those existing definitions structure existence that constitutes, in part, the “anguished ground” of poesis, or making. Mackey writes, “such terms as *deprivation* and *dispossession* are subject to quotation marks,” since Harris “sees any ‘fixed assumption of things’ (and correspondingly the ‘monumental architecture’ by which it is symbolized) as an impediment” (*Discrepant* 165, 167).

Having begun “Call Me Tantra” with an inquiry into Petrarchan models, Mackey takes on a protracted examination of eros through Federico García Lorca’s related concepts of “*duende*” and “*cante moro*,” which Lorca also refers to as “*cante jondo*,” or “deep song.” By focusing on artistic practices deemed to possess *duende*, Mackey produces a rather different sense of the interrelationship between poetic possession and erotic dispossession (or, more broadly, artistic possession and erotic dispossession) that does not depend on a dynamic of lovers who are divided from their beloveds but inheres in the fabric or texture of the work of art. Mackey first considered Lorca’s “*duende*” in his 1980 essay “Limbo, Dislocation, Phantom Limb: Wilson Harris and the Caribbean Occasion,” and then elaborated on this concept at some length in his 1994 essay “Cante Moro.” The concept of *duende* has a rich set of coordinates for Mackey; he likely first encountered it in Lorca’s essay “Theory and Function of the *Duende*,” anthologized by Donald M. Allen and Warren Tallman in *The Poetics of the New American Poetry*. Lorca relates the concept to an “Old World–New World connection” between “black song in Spain, *cante moro*, and black song in Cuba, the music of the Yoruba-Catholic mix known as *lucumí*,” and then links these traditions with the African American music he heard in Harlem. Of the music in Harlem, Lorca claims, “Only the *cante jondo* is comparable,” and in North America “blacks . . . are the most delicate, most spiritual element” (*Paracritical* 183, 189). Mackey notes that early in his essay Lorca quotes the Gypsy singer Manuel Torre, “All that has dark sounds has *duende*,” and then draws attention to a more recent translation of this line, “All that has black sounds has *duende*” (*Paracritical* 182).

While *duende* is not the same as eros, it is enmeshed with it. Mackey comments on how for Lorca it is foremost a musical concept, which Mackey then

links with poetry. Lorca provides an example of a singer who achieved technical virtuosity but failed to move her audience because her singing lacked *duende*. To affect her audience, La Niña de los Peines had to abject herself to her song, become "crazy, torn like a medieval weeper. . . ." Lorca connects *duende* with the singing of *Saeta*, which "means 'arrow.' The song is piercing, heartrending. We hear the singer singing from a position of being pierced" (*Paracritical* 192). Mackey elaborates on this concept through an example from his own work, "Ohnedaruth's Day Begun," in which John Coltrane speaks of playing "Out of This World": "the riff hits / me like rain and like a leak in my / throat it won't quit" (*Eroding* 73). He comments on these verses and their inspiration in Coltrane's music: "This has to do, among other things, with a surge, a runaway dilation, a quantum rush one often hears in Trane's music" (*Paracritical* 191). Mackey connects *duende* with "an exegetic refusal to be done with desire" and analyzes: "It is the breakage in the song beyond which the voice cannot go and it is something more than technical virtuosity that may require a rejection of technical perfection if one is to attain it. . . . *Duende* often has to do with a kind of longing that has no remedy, not simply loss, unrequited love and so forth, but what Lorca calls 'a longing without object'" (185).

The concept of a "longing without object" may be seen to cross between Lacanian and Freudian theories of love and sex. While "without object" inclines toward the Lacanian concept of how lack promulgates desire, especially in light of Mackey's emphasis throughout his work on "unquenchable thirst," the very word "longing" places the production of art back into a field of objects and object cathexis, if through an experience of their absence. In Mackey's work, it is possible to understand how distinctions between mourning and enchantment, and between melancholia and mania (see chapter 2), may implode when the possibility of a socially sanctioned or sustained possession is out of the question. He writes: "meaning manic, / want without remedy" (*Whatsaid Serif* 5). Indeed, in both melancholia and mania, as distinct from mourning and enchantment, the subject, no longer governed by his managerial, egoistic self, is consequently more taken over by the others and objects to which he is attracted. But rather than maintaining his attention on a specific object or beloved, as does Petrarch, Mackey extends aspiring desire and debilitating loss into artistic forms that hold both.

In relating the concept of *duende* to Duncan's poetry, Mackey notes how Duncan associated Spicer and his work with Lorca because of how all three men shared "the trouble" "with being gay" (*Paracritical* 186). He evaluates, "It is not that Lorca advanced a gay poetics, but that they saw in him and his work some of the trouble, for him, of being gay—a certain depression and self-censure, a censuring of his own homosexuality" (186). Duncan associated *duende* with the demonic possession by *eros* conveyed by Plato as necessary for the high-

est reaches of art. Mackey draws out Duncan's inference: "That is what Duncan means by 'the trouble of an unbound reference'—an inordinancy, a lack of ad-equation that is to language what *sin remedio* is to a longing without object. . . . One has worked beyond oneself. It is as if the language itself takes over. . . . [It] is a sound of trouble in the voice. The voice becomes troubled" (182, 186–87). Through "the divine madness of daemonic inspiration," Duncan moves beyond "bound reference," which Mackey connects to sexuality itself. As Mackey notes in "Call Me Tantra," "the boundedness of society is most emphatically clear in its containment of sexuality" (57).

Although Mackey initially drew his projective and open field poetics from concepts articulated by Olson, Duncan's poetry has been a far more important example for Mackey than Olson, as evidenced by the many essays Mackey has written on Duncan in comparison to his one essay on Olson. He analyzes Duncan's *Bending the Bow* as a combined production of strife and love, commenting how for Duncan "falling in love [is] a way of coming into an order of intensities, a richness of intent otherwise unavailable" (*Paracritical* 152). Moreover, he links Duncan's work with that of Wilson Harris and Harris's comment that the "instant of arousal . . . abolishes the 'given' world," holding at bay problematic figural or representational orders in which any writer at odds with the hegemonic signifying system finds him- or herself. Mackey notes that for both Duncan and Harris negative capability is most important, and he quotes Harris on "the irony of self-sufficiency," which he glosses as ironic in its admission of "an otherness residing in the self" (*Discrepant Engagement* 98–99).

That Mackey ascribes to an *ars poetica* that finds sexual love to be productive of art is most clearly brought out in *From a Broken Bottle Traces of Perfume Still Emanate*. Of the music recounted in this five-volume series, the most "ontic" is almost always performed through the auspices of sexual love. In order for the composer-musician N to engage fully the demands of the jazz standard "Body and Soul," he seeks a "door" through a remembered love affair (98). In *Atet A.D.*, the third installment of Mackey's epistolary fiction, an unrealized love affair at the moment of its eclipse leads not only the two band members most immediately involved in this "post-expectancy," but also the entire band, to make great music: "we made some of the most ontic, unheard-of music we've ever made" (430). Mackey describes this music as composed of a "blistering heat" and "articulacy," possessed of a "finesse" and "the nuanced ability to speak." At the peak of its expression, this musical rendition of unrealized love, of "outrageous articulacy," speaks "so exquisitely" that balloons begin to emerge from the bell of the horn, bearing printed messages: "*Having heard flamenco singers early on, I wanted in on duende. . . . All I wanted was to bury my head between her legs. . . . Something I saw, thought I saw, some intangible something led me on*" (426–27). Mackey not



only published this narrative as an episode in his fiction, but used it as an exemplary piece in the title essay for his critical collection *Paracritical Hinge*.

Jazz offers Mackey a love genealogy that competes with poetry in its insistence on sexual love as indelibly linked with artistic production, a genealogy that is amply conveyed by the multiple musical titles in the "Discography" included at the end of *From a Broken Bottle Traces of Perfume Still Emanate*: Charles Mingus's "What Love"; Sonny Rollins and Coleman Hawkins's "Lover Man"; Jackie McLean's "I'll Keep Loving You"; Earl Zero with the Soul Syndicate's "Get Happy"; Yusef Lateef's "Love Theme from Spartacus"; Arthur Prysock's "Someone to Watch Over Me"; the Ornette Coleman Quartet's "Embraceable You"; Miles Davis's "I Fall in Love Too Easily"; Charlie Parker's "What Is This Thing Called Love?"; Ben Webster and Coleman Hawkins's "Prisoner of Love"; Clifton Chenier's "I Can't Stop Loving You"; John Coltrane's "Dearly Beloved"; and many more (*Broken Bottle* 543–54).

In discussing the origins of his epistolary fiction, Mackey recounts a biographical incident. Intrigued by an advertisement for an "outside" music group called "A Love Supreme," Mackey went to their concert to find that he was the only audience member: "It was a strange experience, as though I was there on a special assignment or by special appointment, an appointment I didn't know I had, an odd appointment of an almost mystic sort . . . I felt as though I had been summoned. It felt almost as though I was part of the band, had been inducted into the band. It started me wondering, at least, what being in such a band might be like" (*Paracritical* 213). While Mackey does not comment on how "A Love Supreme" is the title of one of Coltrane's revered and best-selling albums, it would seem that Mackey's jazz-inspired writing is indebted not only to the expectancy, resolution, and irresolution of jazz tempo but to the ways sexual love inheres in these processes and musics.

### *Four for Trane*

Barbara Guest remarked about H.D. that she had an unerring capacity to find what she needed for her art and to engage it (Guest, *Herself* 44). The same could be said of Mackey. In "Call Me Tantra: Open Field Poetics as Muse," he engaged open field poetics through what he referred to as "an open field critical practice," but in a few years he had bent these poetics to his own ends (*Paracritical* 346). In his 1978 essay "Robert Creeley's *The Gold Diggers*: Projective Prose," he identifies the Creeley he wishes to engage and critiques Creeley's use of female figures as foils. In "The Changing Same: Black Music in the Poetry of Amiri Baraka," which appeared in the same year, he relates these poetics most assiduously to jazz and the "new thingers" by engaging Baraka's descriptions of them in *Blues*

*People*. At the same time, Mackey published his first chapbook, *Four for Trane*, beginning this collection with a jazz-inspired projective love poem, "Dearly Beloved." Soon thereafter Mackey extended these poetics in full-length volumes of poetry; his ecstatic poetic speakers or, more accurately, speaking positions are located in what Jack Spicer practiced and Robin Blaser defined as an "outside." For Mackey, this "outside" has expanded over time: within his poetic speakers as a space of affection and disaffection and without as his libidinized field takes on an enlarged set of historical and geographical references.

Mackey has remarked that while he was an undergraduate in the late 1960s he was influenced by Robert Creeley's *For Love* and wrote poems in the manner of Creeley, although no publication of this work exists (*Paracritical* 286–87; "Interview" 214). In his Creeley essay, Mackey turns from Creeley's poetry to his stories because they provide a better model of projective writing. Although Creeley's stories are written through the perspective of individual protagonists, Mackey notes that Creeley does not create individuated characters (*Discrepant* 107). In his stories, Creeley "insist[s] upon the *diffuseness* of feelings, and of possible sources of feeling. He makes use of a field, rather than a focal, approach" (113). Since feelings issue not "*from*" but "*through*" "events," "their ultimate sources [are] as much a mystery as those of life itself" (114). However, despite the many advantages of Creeley's projective prose, Mackey found it wanting because of its use of binary female and male figures: "In a binarism that is not innocent of sexist equations (man = mind, woman = matter) the female characters function as foils for the ruminations of men" (109).

The ostensible reason for Mackey's essay on Amiri Baraka was to query Baraka's rejection of his earlier experimental poetry in *The Dead Lecturer*, published when he was LeRoi Jones, by showing how Baraka's statements about jazz and the "new thingers" in his later *Blues People* replicated many of Olson's statements on projective verse. In doing so, Mackey forged a relation between open field poetics and jazz for his own evolving poetics. Baraka, then Jones, was the only African American poet to be published in Donald Allen's *New American Poetics*, although he came to reject this affiliation. *The Dead Lecturer* was among Mackey's earliest influences and he attempted to show in his essay on Baraka that there was a continuity of endeavor from Baraka's experimental writing to his later overtly polemical engagements. Mackey comments that Baraka's "description of the music of Ornette Coleman and Cecil Taylor, with its emphasis on 'total area' as the determinant of form, is highly suggestive of the Projectivist notion of 'composition by field.'" (*Discrepant* 31). He further links Baraka to Olson's poetics by drawing out how the new jazz is "an assault upon the ego" (36). He quotes Baraka, "Find the self, then kill it" (36).

An important quality in Baraka's early poems, as Mackey sees it and as Baraka commends in liner notes for "Rufus" in Archie Shepp's *Four for Trane* album, is their quick change from one musical phrase to the next: "'Rufus' makes its 'changes' faster. *Changes* here meaning, as younger musicians use that word to mean, 'modulations.' . . . They change very quickly. The mind, moving" (*Discrepant* 40). Mackey analyzes Baraka's early poetry: "The closeness of improvised music to the primacy of process is the quality Baraka strives for in his poems" (32). He theorizes that what Baraka achieved in his early experimental way of writing was actually a way of addressing the "enraged sociologies" that motivated his subsequent polemical work, since this early poetry was "*unlearning* modes of speech that impede the speech he is reaching toward" (45). As Mackey sees it: "Obliquity or angularity . . . challenges the epistemic order whose constraints it implicitly brings to light" (43). And while Mackey himself does not always write nor advocate composing "INSTANTER" or "faster," he practices a poetics in which one perception leads directly to another perception, one language phrase to another.

Mackey began his first chapbook, *Four for Trane* (1978), with a projective love and libidined field poem. "Dearly Beloved" consists of three stanzas replicated verbatim, seemingly spoken by an unidentified poetic speaker, although from the title of the chapbook one might presume this horn player to be John Coltrane or his amanuensis:

Took  
 between my lips  
 Her cusp of  
                   tongue's  
 foretaste of  
 Heaven                   (Heaven) (*Four for Trane*)

Mackey has noted that the poem takes its title from a Coltrane composition on the *Sun Ship* album and that it is "vested in the facts that a horn player takes the horn into his or her mouth, and that the mouth itself is an instrument, the instrument of speech, as well as that mouths initiate or announce the initiation of romance with a kiss or with an 'I love you,' often both . . ." ("Interview" 216). The perspective of the poem is oblique since it ostensibly asks for an identification with the poetic speaker, but provides little orientation by which to accomplish this; moreover, its exact replication calls into question its verisimilitude. "Dearly Beloved" occurs between a past and a present tense, as the horn player "Took" and then commences presumably to play. The poem takes on medieval

love tropes while intimating sexual contact and calls up “Heaven” before reiterating it in the negative space of parentheses. The “(Heaven)” might be heard as a softer, second intoning of the initial “Heaven” or as critiquing it, thereby simultaneously extending its allure and voiding it. Mackey remarks on how he created “Dearly Beloved” specifically for the *Four for Trane* chapbook, the title of which was taken from Shepp’s album of the same name. “Dearly Beloved” is “preceded by a snippet of Trane speaking to the other musicians, ending with the question, ‘Ready?’ So it was resonant, for me, with ideas of readiness and anticipation, not to mention speech, language, the primacy of the word” (“Interview” 216).

“Dearly Beloved” may well be a predecessor poem to Mackey’s “Mu” series, as Mackey himself has commented, given “the conjunction of terms, images and ideas . . . of mouth, myth, muse, music,” which this poem initiated (“Interview” 216). Most of Mackey’s poetry belongs to his two series: “Mu” and *Song of the Andoumboulou*. As he has developed these series over several decades, they cross and “braid” and conceptually keep his concerns with aspiration and failure at the forefront of his writing (*Splay* 1). The “Mu” series with its attention to “lingual and erotic allure” aligns with aspiration, and *Song of the Andoumboulou*, based on a “flawed earlier form of human being from Dogon myth,” makes failure a constant. Mackey’s initial poems dubbed as “Mu” were written in relation to Erzulie, and his *Song of the Andoumboulou* reference an “underness” (*Splay* xi). Mackey first encountered “Song of the Andoumboulou” on the album *Les Dogon* while hosting a “musical mix program” for a noncommercial radio station in Los Gatos, California, KTAO (“Interview” 212). He discovered the album in the station library and played it, also reading on the air from Marcel Griaule’s book on the Dogon, *Conversations with Ogotemmêli*. The Andoumboulou, who are born of and smaller than the Yeben, both the progeny of incestuous relations, inhabit the interior of the earth. Mackey quotes from his source text, Marcel Griaule and Germaine Dieterlen’s *The Pale Fox*: “The Yeben [are] small creatures with big heads, discolored bodies, and frail limbs who, for shame of their condition, hide in the holes of the earth” (*Udhra* 1).

### *Eroding Witness*

Initiating his projective love writing with “Dearly Beloved,” Mackey extends this writing and its outside in his first three full-length volumes of poetry. In *Eroding Witness*, Mackey composes additional poems that channel jazz players, which as “witnesses” are “eroding,” perhaps Mackey’s equivocal response to Baraka’s declamatory title *The Dead Lecturer*. In *School of Udhra* and *Whatsaid Serif*, Mackey’s takes on a set of new geographies and historical concerns and increased kinetic and proprioceptive relations. The title of *School of Udhra* is from the seventh-

century Bedouin school of poetry, in which poets "loving die," a tradition that Mackey associates with Provençal love poetry.<sup>6</sup> While in this volume he calls on a love poetry constituted through lovers' address to or about their beloveds, he engages this love poetry through a set of deracinated poetic speakers. This poetry in focusing on a "School" or a tradition addresses love writing through a composite tradition or aesthetic practice that exceeds its basis in individual poems. *Whatsaid Serif* takes on a love marked by social, cultural, and economic relations of indentured work and the so-called free labor markets of capitalism, beginning, as identified by Paul Naylor, in Andalusia, Spain. Naylor explicates the relations of *Whatsaid Serif*: "There is no remedy for lost love, when humans are the objects and subjects of sale" (599). While Naylor remarks on this work's increased, finely textured thickness, it in many ways possesses a greater openness, a more pulled-apart weave, than Mackey's preceding works. Mackey's poems' proprioceptive and kinetic energies culminate in *Whatsaid Serif* with its emphasis on travel and locomotion. Yet, although the volumes in some ways can be differentiated from each other, there are significant overlaps as concepts and phrases that appear in one volume are recontextualized and inflected differently in a later volume, in a slowed-down projective-introjective writing in which perception leads directly to further perception, language to further language.

As do each of Mackey's first three volumes, *Eroding Witness* begins with what might be loosely categorized as a muse or beloved poem. The figure in "Waters . . .," however, disappears into the concrete instance of the poem with its segmented phrases and dynamic relations between symbolic and sensate registers:

Waters  
 wet the  
 mouth. Salt  
 currents come  
 to where the  
 lips, thru  
 which the tongue  
 slips, part.

At the tongue's  
 tip the sting  
 of saltish  
 metal rocks  
 the wound. A  
 darkness there  
 like tar,

like bits of  
drift at ocean's  
edge. A slow

retreat of  
waters beaten  
back upon  
themselves.

An undertow  
of whirl im-  
mersed in  
words. (*Eroding* 3)

While this poem may be intimating actual sexual contact, it also brings a sense of cosmological “drift,” with “salty waters” referring to the most basic and pervasive element of life, whether as oceanic plenitude or bodily constitution. The poem’s concern with “the wound” links with bodily vulnerabilities. “Waters . . .” portrays the literal and concrete, while simultaneously conjuring “An undertow / of whirl im- / mersed in / words.” Mackey has commented on “Waters . . .” in relationship to “Dearly Beloved”: “‘Waters . . .’ gets at some of the same inferences and implications—mouth, word, whetting, readiness—while bearing on *Eroding Witness*’s wider scope. It shares an imagery of tongue between parted lips that’s both erotic and elocutionary and an imagery of vertical transport with ‘Dearly Beloved,’ oceanic rather than celestial and more announcedly linguistic” (“Interview” 217). Both “Dearly Beloved” and “Waters . . .” are reminiscent of William Carlos Williams’s earlier poetry in their tensions between symbolic and sensate registers and in their lineation, which places emphasis on fragmentary phrases and individual words. In Williams’s and Mackey’s early poems these tensions incline the poetry toward an allegorical reading that the work itself ultimately refuses. In the early essay “That Words Can Be on the Page,” Mackey comments on Williams’s “Rain” in ways that are useful for reading “Waters . . .”: “Love is that quality of cleansed, purified perception that renews the world, bestowing upon it the grace of an attention to concrete particulars, an almost worshipful regard for ‘the thing itself.’ . . . The spacing employed in the poem is meant to further an arousal of the love that attends to each word or each worldly object as a thing in and of itself” (*Discrepant* 124).

Mackey’s channeling of specific musicians and musics extends the poetry in *Eroding Witness* into an enriched and amplified field. Very different from Pound’s early poems, in which he creates personae by combining troubadour lifestyles and their utterances, Mackey is engaged by musicians and their musics as me-







While the "Lacking teeth" may refer to the Haitians or "the dead," also referred to in the poem, Mackey's previous engagement with the differentially intoned "Heaven (Heaven)" is further polarized in this rendition because of an increased need for heaven's allure as well as a rejection of its sham. That is, while the name "Heaven" creates a hunger for heaven, it is insufficient to respond to the hunger it elicits: "what of / it I refuse / forks an angel's tongue." This refusal of "Heaven," of what is desired, forks an angel's tongue, turning it devilish or demonic. However, the refusal of the way heaven creates a false promise of something heavenly either now or in the future also has the power to "awake[n]" a "stone." Indeed, the negation of heaven takes all the power of heaven into itself as a site of loss and desire, failure and aspiration, voiding, at least momentarily, the false promises that cling to it.

### *School of Udhra*

In titling his second full-length book of poetry *School of Udhra*, Mackey calls up a love poetry constituted through lovers' address to or about their beloveds, but attends to this writing as a composite "School" or tradition. Drawing on this Bedouin tradition, Mackey notes similarities between it and the Arab tradition in Spain, thought by many scholars to have been a determining influence on Provençal troubadour poetry. Mackey recounts discovering the School of Udhra in the *Encyclopedia of Islam* (when he was researching names for *Bedouin Hornbook*) through an entry on Djamil, who is credited with being "the first [poet] to speak of love as an ever-present cosmic force" (*Encyclopedia* 427). Mackey links this tradition to others in which "the idea of the ecstatic love-death . . . is both secular and sacred," including Islamic mysticism, which plays with "the confusion" between the secular and the sacred (*Paracritical* 291). The *Encyclopedia of Islam* describes Djamil as "enflamed with love for his fellow tribeswoman," whom he was not able to marry because of her father's refusal of their union (427). Djamil wrote poetry throughout his life about this lost or failed love, recounting on his deathbed the place of their meeting. But while for Mackey ecstatic love traditions have much in common, there is at least one difference between Djamil's love writing and troubadour love poetry. Troubadour poetry's lover is often of a lesser social rank than his beloved, and he engages his love quest with often minimal hope of attaining his beloved; for Djamil, the emotional tenor stays with the power of his abandoned or unrealized love for a tribeswoman of presumably equal status, which is also the dominant scenario of Mackey's projective love writing. While both modes in their emotional intensity may well spell a death to the lover, or at least to his everyday managerial or egoistic self, troubadour poetry makes unrequited desire prominent whereas the



Took the dust of an eroded footprint,  
 rolled as if thru dirt I'd  
 see the coming forth of suns.  
 Sowed ruins of what by then would  
 whose walls collapse and  
                                 crumble,  
 dervished air so thin one's  
                                 heartbeats  
                                 hum . . . (4)

Mackey, intimating a scene of power and destruction in which the poetic speaker's air is "dervished," depicts a state seemingly at the very edge of consciousness in which the experience is one of being knocked about by powers that exceed rational orders. The "oldtime people" in this poem express themselves far more ambiguously, saying, "hurt is light angels eat" (*Udhra* 4). In the following poem, the speaker tells of reading a "dead friend's poem," in which the line "*Rugs burnt Persian red* repeated." Later, these "rugs" are "burnt":

                                Deep  
 inside one stumbles. Rugs burnt. Burning.  
 No light.  
                                 Baited lip. Love's lawless  
 jaw. Said, "I love you," loaded  
                                 like  
 a pointed gun. (5)

Leaving behind his initial portrait of Erzulie, Mackey concatenates his poetry's semantic, visual, and aural elements. The phrase "loaded / like / a pointed gun" may refer to the personal and social dangers of sexual love, including perhaps the proverbial shotgun marriage or other dangers accompanying passionate relationships.

Throughout the initial section of *School of Udhra*, "Song of the Andoumboulou: 8–15," a threatening "cut" slices its way: "Our Mistress's / whispers, / thrust / of a cross cut saw . . ."; "Saw myself bled, belatedly cut / . . . thunder whet the edge / of a knife"; and "Riven lip" (4, 10, 11). If this sequence of poems has a philosophy, it is "no way out / if not thru," and the poems compound imagery and sound, as in the concluding "Song of the Andoumboulou: 15":

                                Cast off  
 only to be called back,

cut,  
 sewn up again. Tenuous  
 throatsong, hoof to the head waking  
 up, plucking music from a meatless  
 rib . . .

Rickety tauntsong. Plum's pit.  
 Staining the hands with henna. (20)

A concluding introjection of this projective sequence, "song" itself is imaged through violent and "rickety" qualities. The "cut, / sewn up again" points to both the singer, "To be found after waiting / so long but found wanting," and to his song, which in retrospect seems a series of cuts and sewing, "returning" "rhapsody to its root sense stitching together" (*Udhra*, 7, back cover). The "*Persian red*," first "read" in a friend's poem and later put on as a "robe," is now "henna," calling up a transmogrifying feminine figure. The semantic and aural relations of this sequence are rich and difficult to account for entirely. For example, the consonance of "plucking" combines with "plum" to contrast with the prolonged assonance of "tauntsong," of its ribless *au* and *o* sounds that connect conceptually with "meatless" and eventuate in a "pit," both hole and seed, the concreteness of the latter enabling a transition to the very physical act of "staining."

If the domain of the *School of Udhra* is lost love, *Whatsaid Serif* engages the afterburn of failed love and investigates recrimination and regret. *School of Udhra* circles around "loss, / relatedness, lack / . . . to be free of its / memory, / This they'd pick their / hearts out aiming / for" (23). *Whatsaid Serif* brings a more defined set of social issues to the forefront, in contrast to *School of Udhra*'s poetry of lovers who "when loving die." In *Whatsaid Serif* Mackey addresses erotic possession and dispossession as these are marked by large-scale social, cultural, and economic relations of indentured work and slavery in capitalism and its so-called free labor markets. The volume can be seen to be a pulled-apart *cante moro* as the poetry draws together the traumatic legacies of capitalism and racism with a wounding and wounded love. While a sense of the ecstatic runs throughout much of Mackey's poetry, it is intensified in *Whatsaid Serif* because of the work's increased proprioceptive relations.

If in the *School of Udhra*, strife inheres for the most part in love relations themselves, in *Whatsaid Serif*, strife is both within love and without. An impasse between two lovers, which is the subject of much of the book, is caught up in the fact that she saw him struck or wounded. At times what or who is doing the striking is syntactically unclear, suggesting that this wounding is the condition of the relationship itself, apart from any particular wounding act. In

a detailed analysis of the first poem in the volume, "Song of the Andoumbou-lou: 16," Naylor comments that its opening scene conveys the conditions of indentured work and slavery and links these to the volume's concerns with failed and lost love. Throughout *Whatsaid Serif* there is a marked sense of movement, proprioception, as the "she" and "he" travel on train, bus, and boat. Mackey has commented that in *Whatsaid Serif* "the sense of itineracy . . . is increasingly accented," and "tropes of vehicular movement—bus, boat, train—recur and senses of arrival and/or frustrated arrival are articulated over and over again" (*Paracritical* 325). Naylor links the experience of crossing over thresholds to the experience of ecstasy: "These transpositions, then can be seen as ecstatic experiences, as ways of standing outside of what or where one is" (595). Indeed, the sense of perpetual motion makes the experience of traveling with the "he" and "she" one of dislocation, in which the only mooring for the reader is the movement of the poetry itself: "what was / now most real was the 'away / from'" (*Whatsaid Serif* 23). The reader is neither inside nor outside these lovers' experiences but in the phenomenal space of the poem itself.

There are multiple entities in the poem: "he," "she," "I," "we," "they," and a "whatsayer." At times the different entities are presented as existing in some opposition to each other; at other times they slide into each other, as gender differentiation and coupledness itself are questioned: "Wanted to say of he-and-she-ness / it creaks . . . / each the / other's / legendary lack . . . / We, / who'd have been done / with both, / looked out across the wall, / saw / no new day / come" (*Whatsaid Serif* 83). The role of the whatsayer is described through an opening epigraph from Ellen B. Basso's *A Musical View of the Universe* as the necessary recipient of the story, who may ask for clarification. In *Whatsaid Serif*, the what-sayer often operates through his or her own inimicable despair: "I was the what-sayer. / Whatever he said I would / say so what" (22). Experiences in *Whatsaid Serif* often manifest in their most elemental or particle-like aspects. The remembered love between the two lovers is often reduced to its repeating traumatic and discordant elements, as phrases restricted to a seemingly plain speech repeat and morph: "The he she remembers not / the he she saw stepping into the train"; "She no longer the she who'd / arrived announced, he no longer / the he I'd been taken aside / by"; "the he-and-she / she wanted, the he-and-she / they were"; "each the / other's pronominal / elsewhere" (10, 59, 61, 81). These lovers are haunted by lovers' usual problems, which Mackey turns into states of being: "School-of-What-Hurts / her"; "Power the problem, lack of / power the problem"; "Push come to shove she'd / be with him" (11, 41, 42).

In the *School of Udhra* Mackey engages both present and past tenses; whereas, in *Whatsaid Serif* he develops a particular version of a past tense, which actually creates the illusion of a present tense, because of how the poetry proceeds



By tracing Mackey's "versioning" of the riffs that first occurred in "Dearly Beloved" in *Whatsaid Serif*, Mackey's projective love writing, as a very slowed-down perception leading to further perception, language to further language, can be appreciated (*Discrepant* 266). "Andoumboulou: 16" investigates multiple scenes of ravishment, countering them at one point through a feminine, if not a female, perspective, as "she" puts a child to bed, blessed by "flat sanity's / enablement." This singular incident is preceded and followed by more disturbing events, including such terrors as "charred bodies blown / about, unembalmable, / bombed" (6). Moreover, the "sane" perspective of putting a child to bed rather than staying "sanity's" course crosses over into the yearning for something more, some ravishment. This further reaching produces a "heaven" rather different from the one in "Dearly Beloved," although composed of some of the same "licks" as in Mackey's earlier poem:

Took between her lips their  
 gruff tongues' foretaste of  
 "heaven," raspy word given  
 back by the newly  
   dead (*Whatsaid Serif* 6-7)

Whereas in "Dearly Beloved," heaven is associated with "the initiation of romance," in this volume it is indentured. In "Song of Andoumboulou: 24," the trope of heaven is engaged again but this time as a product of "burred / speech" and a "Not-All-There" (43):

Took between his lips her  
 cusp of tongue's foretaste  
 of "heaven,"      ravenous  
   word they  
 heard urging them on, loquat  
   spin. Teeth broke biting  
 her lip,      intoxicant meat he'd  
   been  
   warned against, took between  
   his teeth . . . Took between  
 his own her bleeding lip's  
   lost  
 lustre,      ravenous  
   word

taken back, bitten into,  
burst . . . (40)

Echoing the earlier rendition of “heaven’s foretaste,” this “foretaste” of “heaven” partakes of love’s “meat”—of “lustre” lost to a “bleeding” from the “word” heaven itself. Biting into the word “heaven,” it “bursts.” This aporia shows the “whatsayer” in a brief noncommittal appearance as he pronounces dryly on the perceived staticness of the poem’s pronounced proprioceptive relations: “what plot there was” was “one of / stepping on, stepping / off” (*Whatsaid Serif* 40, 41).

Occasionally in *Whatsaid Serif* Mackey approaches a realized love, although even these realizations partake of hungers. In “Song of the Andoumboulou: 22,” the vision of love approaches the ecstatic: “Woven of / sun, sun woven of cloth inflaming their / bodies.” But this causes the “I,” or the whatsayer, to remark: “‘Some / ride it sounds like’ was all I could / say. . . .” (33). Song 22 concludes with a vision of “Loquat exuberance,” “loquat allure,” but Mackey can only find it amid “rotting / fruit” (35):

As if to say soul  
seeks out low places . . . As if  
to say loquat height let go,  
  
rotting  
fruit lay at the foot of the  
tree, having gone to their heads.  
Loquat elixir. Ambient wine.  
Ubiquitous whiff (35)

The immediate reference for “loquat” is a loquat tree, which has fragrant white flowers, pear-shaped fruit, and large seeds. “Loquat” reminds of “love” and “*loa*” as well as, in this particular poem, the “low squat” of women peeing in a field. For Mackey “low places” are not only negative spaces but a necessary “underness” through which life may retreat or repair, since “soul / seeks out low places” (*Whatsaid Serif* 33–35).

In *Whatsaid Serif*, Mackey engages eros through extreme dislocation. The implied author, who like the whatsayer assumes stances of standing outside of and apart from, approaches the ecstatic. Near the end of the volume, this projective love writing culminates in a skeletal vision of its own design:



we  
were beyond it, bleak skeleton crew on  
the boat we rode, subtly in front,  
phantom  
projection (*Whatsaid Serif* 103)

At this juncture, *Whatsaid Serif* lays bare the device of its construction. In Mackey's subsequent volume *Splay Anthem*, the poetic speaker declares, "To abide by hearing was / what love was" (*Splay* 93). Not motivated to stay his poetry's "thirst," Mackey catches up with his poetry, and his object of love coincides with the very way in which he hears his words.